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ABSTRACT

The extent of school violence and vandalism is staggering, according to the author. He briefly reviews the history of conflict in American education, concluding that when a new group of people comes into an institution, such as the public schools, there is bound to be conflict and tension, as when the schools were desegregated by court order. He points out that most reported incidents of school violence occur among members of the same ethnic or racial group, not between members of different groups. More female students are now involved in school violence. He suggests that violence may simply be the result of a young person's natural maturation from adolescence into adulthood. He advocates increasing student participation in school descision-making as a means of reducing violence and vandalism. (Author/DS)

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the problem and its solutions

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VIOLENCE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS:
the problem and its solution

by

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Over a five year period, the following selected incidents occurred in one large urban school district. These violent acts are a representative sampling of everyday events within our public schools:

Fall 1973. The Superintendent of the City's Public Schools was assassinated by a radical community group in the central office parking lot just after a School Board meeting.

Spring 1974. A high school vice-principal was shot at by an irate parent in his school office.

Fall 1974. A black male student and a white male student fought outside an alternative high school.

Spring 1975. An Oriental male student was stabbed to death by two other Oriental male students in a high school cafeteria.

Spring 1976. A group of black female students fought during lunch period in a junior high school.

Spring 1977. Teachers at a junior high school reported their cars vandalized, their classrooms marked-up, and personal threats made against them.

Fall 1977. The entire teaching staff in the School District went on strike for three weeks.

All of these incidents were acts of violence within one School District. They do not even reach the depth of the problem. Several of the events never reached the media while others made national headlines. Separately or together they are symptomatic of the problems in the public schools.

By the summer of 1975, Senator Birch Bayh had heard testimony on School Violence and Vandalism for his U.S. Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency. The preliminary report of his inquiry was called Our Nation's Schools - A Report Card: 'A' in School Violence and Vandalism. It caught the imagination and attention of the nation. The national news media dramatized the Report while parents, students, and educators finally openly admitted that there was a problem. School violence had "come out of the closet."

But the extent of school violence and vandalism was not nationally known. Educational historians could shed little light on the matter. School districts rarely compiled statistics on incidents of violence and vandalism. And scholars had not studied the problem itself. The public and politicans demanded to know more. As a result of the Bayh Committee's reports, the National Institute of Education was directed to conduct a nationwide survey; the Law Enforcement Assistant Agency was told by Congress to institute preventive programs; and the search

was on to find successful programmatic solutions to school violence.

Now, three years and several millions of dollars later, some results are in. The extent of school violence and vandalism is staggering. Over 70,000 physical assaults on teachers are reported annually. The cost of school vandalism is estimated at more than half a billion dollars. During a three year period (1970-1973), the Senate Subcommittee survey found:

> (a) Homicides increased by 18.5 percent; (b) rapes and attempted rapes increased by 40.1 percent; (c) robberies increased by 36.7 percent; (d) assaults on students increased by 85.3 percent; (e) assaults on teachers increased by 77.4 percent; (f) burglaries of school buildings increased by 11.8 percent; (g) drug and alcohol offenses on school property increased by 37.5 percent; and (h) dropouts increased by 11.7 percent (Bayh, 1975:3).

These are national figures that add up to make public schools "combat zones." The recent National Institute of Education Report (1978) concludes in part that students feel safer on city streets than in the school buildings. But the situation is not limited to a national sample or isolated cities. San Francisco, for example, "everyone's favorite city", reported remarkable numbers of incidents of school violence and vandalism during the same three year period (1970-1973) as the U. S. Senate Subcommittee survey. Heading the list was defiance of authority with 4,924 incidents; fighting with 3,834; theft with 1,276; vandalism with 1,267; and other assorted incidents (rapes, assaults, robbery, etc.) with 2,854 (San Francisco Chronicle, 1973).

The situation appears grim. It is no wonder that standardized test scores for public school children are declining. Schools are not a safe environment in which to learn. Survival becomes the new behavior code for America's students. How long has this situation existed? And how long will it continue? are two difficult questions. This paper attempts to place the problem of school violence in some perspective through some historical data, covering fifteen years and by defining the problem. Once school violence is defined, it can be solved through programmatic means.

Violence is not new to schools. What is new tends to be the public awareness of the problem. When a new group of people come into an organization or institution, there is bound to be conflict and tension. Historically, this conflictual situation has existed since public schools opened their doors. At first, the new groups were religious ones that differed from the New England puritans. Today, the existence of parochial and church-related schools are a direct result of the conflict between church and state. Public education and religion have never been able to co-exist within public schools.

Initially, the result of the Civil War placed black children into white classrooms but communities in the South, and as well as the North, found convenient and legal ways to avoid integration of public schools. The Supreme Court in 1898 itself sanctioned "separate but equal" education for black

students. Northern cities simply created racial ghettos. By the end of the 19th Century, other new groups in schools were brought into public education.

Millions of immigrants, mostly from Europe, came to the United States. They, too, found conflict and violence within the pbulic school. This time the trouble was cultural. The new groups spoke different languages, dressed oddly, and behaved peculiarly, according to the already enculturated students and their parents. Even the professional educators found it difficult to cope with the foreigners.

The disruptive impact on the public schools continued for nearly half a century. New groups would form private schools based upon cultural, religious or racial factors to avoid the inevitable conflicts over educational pedagogy, discipline, morals, values, and beliefs. The 1954 Brown, Supreme Court case, changed much of that. At least for racial groups, schools must be integregated. Racial segregation was ruled illegal. No longer were "separate by equal" schools tolerated. Thus two old groups, blacks and whites, would have to be educated together. The natural result would be conflict.

Over the past quarter century, since the Brown decision, the violence in schools has been primarily a result of parents and community people who have resisted integration. At first, even the governors of some southern states blocked the doorways of school buildings. In the north, whole neighborhoods would turn out to block school buses. No wonder the students themselves

would bring some of that tension into the classroom and hallways.

Nevertheless, school violence is not a phenomenon that can be attributed to just racial integration of schools. Other elements enter into the picture. For example, statistics show that most reported incidents of school violence occur within and among ethnic (or racial) groups. That is, fighting in schools is usually between two or more black students rather than black and white students against each other. Unfortunately, the media tends to report the racial incidents.

Another interesting element in school violence can be along gender lines. Violence in schools is not committed just by young men. Female students are often involved but often overlooked. As a survey of over 4,000 students in the Richmond California Public Schools indicated in 1966, at least 16% (n=892) were young women. While the number is not great, the young men who were reported fighting was only 42% (Wilson et al., 1966). Indications are that by the late 1970s, young women are involved even more so in school violence than ever before.

A third element of school violence may simply be a young person's natural maturation from adolescence into adulthood. The Oakland California Public Schools conducted a stratified sample survey of parents, students, and staff in 1974. The results are instructive. Students reported "feeling safer" in school as they got older. In the 7th grade, 22.1% felt safe but by the 12th grade 43.4% felt safe. The highest percentage of students who felt unsafe were in the junior high schools.

Further evidence collaborates the fact that school violence exists in junior high schools and is increasing even in elementary schools.

The maturation issue becomes significant when considered as the degree to which a person has or feels control over his or her life. Within public schools, students (as well as parents and teachers) have little control over their working and learning environment. As adults, people expect to participate in decision-making that affects their everyday lives. Students tend to feel the most disenfranchised. Hence, they become alienated and frustrated with the entire educative process.

The Oakland Survey data is again useful. When students, parents, and staff were asked who made the school rules, the responses indicated how each felt little control over its environment. Over 50% of the students believed either the Principal or the Board of Education made up the school rules. At least 26% did not know who made them. Almost two-thirds of the parents believed the Board of Education made the school rules with 40% also indicating the Principal. An overwhelming 85% of the staff felt that the Principal made the school rules. Yet 65% of the staff also thought the Board of Education and Teachers made the school rules. While parents and staff have a better idea of who makes the rules, students are mostly in the dark. The students are asked to obey and respond to school rules that they neither influenced or made.

Students do want to participate in school decision making. In the same Oakland Survey, over 70% of the students said they wanted to be involved in curricula decisions. Almost 55% of the school staff, on the other hand, did not want student involvement in curricula areas

Keeping students out of the decision-making process only confirms their "lowly status and role" within the school. They are viewed and treated like children when many are really adults. As long as these conditions continue, students will be forced to act violently. They are seeking some momentary relief and escape from the entrapment of education. Rather than education freeing the mind, the student of today sees it as hypocritical and contradictory. No wonder an estimated two million students drop-out of school annually.

We must stop and ask what we mean by violence and vandalism. Unfortunately, the terms have not been properly defined by the media and academic communities. The most concise and useful definition comes straight from Webster's Dictionary. Violence consists of two kinds: physical acts against people or property; and non-physical acts against people. The former, I call physical violence (which does not include vandalism, that is, acts against property); and the latter is psychological violence. We have discussed both these dimensions of violence above. Physical violence includes the assaults, rapes, fights, riots, etc. that have added up to some staggering statistics. But psychological violence is more subtle and covert. In the statistics from

the San Francisco School District, leading the list was "defiance of authority." It is a perfect example of psychological violence committed by schools against students. The fact that it ranked number one on the list of violent student behavior confirms the findings from the Oakland Survey.

Psychological violent acts, such as labeling a student "defiant of authority," ignores the student's own mental and physical maturity. The student felt no participation in making the rule or regulation that was broken; and received a bad behavioral report that will be a part of the school record throughout his or her career. Such acts of psychological violence against students are everyday occurrences within the public schools. The use of due process proceedings, hearings, and legal remedies are inadequate and avoid the basic issues.

School violence and vandalism committed by students is often the result of accumulated acts of psychological violence committed by the school against students. An interesting example comes from an ethnographic study of a fight in an alternative high school. After hours of interviewing students, parents, and staff, it became clear that the fight between two male students was the direct result of one teacher calling one of the fighters "dumb" and "stupid" in a large group conseling session. When another student in the group took the teacher's lead and called the student names as well, a fight was inevitable (Clark, 1985).

Violence in public schools will stop when educators and parents recognize that students are young adults. Rules and regulations must exist, but only with the participation of those who must abide by them. Records and files might be needed but not to stigmatize and label students for life. Academic grades and credits need to distinguish and mark achievement, but not to be used as punishments and awards. Suspensions and expulsions might be appropriate in limited cases, but not to ignore and dismiss basic educative problems. Alternative and optional programs might provide choice but not to track and mainstream students into dead-end careers.

Public school violence and vandalism will be reduced when educators, parents, and politicians provide the mechanisms that allow and encourage students (and others) to participate in decision making. One of the most encouraging news in that regard comes, ironically, in the form of California State legislation, Assembly Bill 65. A major section of the Act calls for the "improvement of Elementary and Secondary Education" through the establishment of School-Site Councils. After a three year planning process, schools, who opt for the concept, would establish school-site councils which "ensure parity between (a) the principal, classroom teachers and other school personnel; and (b) parents or other community members selected by parents" (AB 65:36) at the elementary level. Part (b) would be changed at the secondary level to read "equal numbers of parents and pupils" (AB 65:36).

The councils would be the single decision making group (with some exceptions) in the school. They would be policy making bodies and not an advisory group. They would establish needs, set priorities, conduct staff development sessions. In short, the school site councils would have power. The model parallels that of the American representative government system. The councils could be seen as the legislative branch within the schools with the principal acting as the executive or administrative body. Students would finally be able to participate actively in substantive decisions. School violence would be reduced and prevented because students will have control over their own education.

All the answers are not in yet, but some basic hope exists. Bandaid and patch-work programs as well as increased security guards and rigid disciplinary codes are not the solutions to school violence. In fact, parallel research indicates that they not only prolong the problem but also add fuel to the fire. Instead, students as young adults must be given their independence and freedom. They must be allowed to make good and bad decisions as any adult would do. They must be enfranchised into the basic political process that comprises, constraints, and reflects the reality of public education in America today.

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